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# Germans as Seen through American Eyes: Anti-Immigrant Discourse in the Works of Dunbar-Nelson, Stein, and Cather

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## Abstract

The United States of America is, as so many people like to point out, an immigrant nation. But tensions arising from immigration and negative reactions to immigrants are just as much a part of the national heritage. Anti-immigrant sentiment is nothing new. The stigmatization of Chinese, Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants in American history is well documented. The story of German immigrants, however, is bit more complex. The Mid-Atlantic colonies welcomed German Protestants as land-owners and homesteaders in the country's earliest days, actively recruiting them from their homeland, yet later waves of German immigrants were far less welcome. This essay considers how these later waves of German immigrants and their undesirable, if not outright dangerous, influences were depicted by three American authors in the early days of the twentieth century. Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Gertrude Stein, and Willa Cather each captured in their belletristic writing the animosities and anxieties of the nation and the time in response to German immigration. Dunbar-Nelson's "Tony's Wife" (1899) presents German immigrants as just one more category of undesirables who were undermining the nation's conception of itself. Stein's *Three Lives* (1909) engages in some horribly bigoted stereotyping of Germans who threaten to contaminate the nation with their presence. And Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) sets Germans at odds with sober, serious, hard-working America even before the explicit hostilities brought about by World War I surface. That these three authors decided to engage in the anti-German-immigrant feelings of the time is noteworthy, since these women were, in their own ways, marginalized themselves. First as women, these authors would have felt their diminished status, then as African-American, Jew, and/or queer, their disenfranchisement would have been even more profound. This essay explores, then, how those on the margins of the American national polity imagine others in similarly precarious circumstances.

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